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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 000584

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

DRL FOR KATE BERGLAND, S/CA FOR DON CAMP

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/31/2018

TAGS: [KDEM](#) [BG](#)

SUBJECT: DAS BARKS-RUGGLES PRESSES BANGLADESH TO BUILD
DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty. Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

[¶1.](#) (C) Deputy Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor Erica Barks-Ruggles in a trip to Bangladesh emphasized the importance of holding free, fair and credible elections this year, of maintaining a free press and of building lasting democratic institutions. She also underlined USG support for further progress on labor rights. During her 5/19-5/21 visit, her comments promoting human rights received prominent and favorable coverage in print and broadcast media. Her visit helped Post efforts to encourage a swift and enduring return to democracy in Bangladesh.

ENCOURAGING FREE, FAIR, CREDIBLE ELECTIONS

[¶2.](#) (SBU) DAS Barks-Ruggles' visit to Bangladesh came on the eve of crucial talks between the Caretaker Government and political parties to create a positive environment for local and national elections scheduled by the end of the year. In all her meetings, she stressed the need to ensure free, fair, transparent and credible elections. This would require an environment that allowed for open campaigning and free media -- requiring the lifting of the State of Emergency sooner rather than later. In her meetings with political party leaders, Barks-Ruggles stressed the importance of returning to democratically elected government. This effort, she acknowledged, would require compromise and dialogue to avoid an impasse over the future role of the two former prime ministers who lead the major parties, Sheikh Hasina of the Awami League and Khaleda Zia of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party. (Note: Both leaders are in prison on corruption charges, and the parties are demanding their release to participate in the electoral process. End note.) Barks-Ruggles also argued that the winner-take-all politics of the past that kept the losing party from playing any constructive role in running the country needed to be reshaped into a less confrontational mode.

[¶3.](#) (SBU) Two of three Election Commission members briefed Barks-Ruggles that more than 70 million out of an estimated 80 million eligible Bangladeshis had been registered to vote; this represented a mammoth undertaking that included the issuing of photo identification cards. The EC members said the registration field work would conclude in late June or early July; posting of preliminary election rolls for review in areas where registration had been completed and would continue on a rolling basis through mid-September. The final

voter list for the national elections scheduled for the third week in December should be ready by the middle of October.

14. (SBU) The commissioners said all candidates would have to meet stringent requirements to run for office. For example, people who had defaulted on bank loans or who were delinquent on their phone bill would not qualify. They said that any Election Commission ruling on candidate qualification, either for or against, could be challenged. On election day, votes would be tallied at each polling station in front of party agents and then publicly posted at each polling station to prevent electoral fraud. The Commissioners also said their decision to hold non-partisan local elections before the Parliamentary vote was designed to minimize the influence of local political party bosses and serve as a "dry run" for national elections in December. The Commissioners defended their decision to redraw more than 100 Parliamentary districts, saying that the old boundaries had created disproportionately sized districts and were more reflective of fiefdoms of powerful local politicians than of population realities.

ENCOURAGING A FREE MEDIA, OPEN SOCIETY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

15. (C) DAS Barks-Ruggles heard leading journalists complain about harassment from officials, particularly from the military's Directorate General Forces Intelligence (DGFI). The journalists explained the chilling effect of frequent phone calls reporters had received from DGFI suggesting how stories should be played and which stories should not be

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published. In a subsequent meeting, DGFI Director General Maj. Gen. Golam Mohammad and Director of Counterterrorism Brig. Gen. ATM Amin acknowledged such phone calls; DAS Barks-Ruggles urged them to stop the practice immediately. In response to DGFI's repeated attempts to manipulate politics, Barks-Ruggles noted that military intelligence should stop meddling in what was a civilian affair.

16. (C) Law Adviser A.F. Hassan Ariff expressed concern during his meeting with Barks-Ruggles over draft legislation that would make "frivolous" or "annoying" complaints by citizens about security forces or the police punishable by a fine and/or jail. He said the proposal was "obnoxious" and could lead to a sense of impunity among law enforcement officials. Barks-Ruggles and the Ambassador subsequently raised concerns about this provision with DGFI and with the Foreign Adviser, both of whom acknowledged that the provision would undermine the purpose of the law. They both pledged to look into the matter. Ariff also said that a plan to develop a professional prosecutorial service had just begun and gradually would lead to the replacement of all politically appointed prosecutors. (Note: Through Post's Resident Legal Adviser, the Mission has long pushed for such reforms with Law Ministry officials, even before the State of Emergency was declared in 2007. End note.)

ENCOURAGING LABOR RIGHTS

17. (C) Barks-Ruggles encouraged several leading government and business officials to improve labor conditions. At a meeting hosted by Commerce Adviser Hossain Zillur Rahman, officials acknowledged child labor was present in the shrimp industry and provided details on how they planned to resolve the problem. David Welsh, the country program director for the American Center for International Labor Solidarity, said that after several months of little activity the pace of workers' association elections in the two major Export Processing Zones (EPZ) had quickened markedly. Since late summer 2007, elections had been held in nearly 100 factories in the Chittagong EPZ and in about 40 more in the smaller Dhaka EPZ. The vast majority had led to creation of workers'

associations. In a meeting with Labor and Manpower Adviser Anwarul Iqbal, Barks-Ruggles urged him not to implement a plan to limit workers' choice of representatives to three unions per factory.

MEDIA INTEREST IN THE VISIT

18. (SBU) Local media were keenly interested in Barks-Ruggles visit, and more than a dozen newspapers and television stations attended her on-the-record news conference that resulted in several Page One articles. She emphasized the importance of lifting State of Emergency restrictions on political activity to ensure free, fair and credible elections. She also told reporters that the government, political parties and civil society had to work hard to build institutions necessary for lasting democracy. Media reaction to these pro-democracy messages was generally very positive.

CONCLUSION: AN IMPORTANT MESSAGE DELIVERED

19. (C) Barks-Ruggles' visit on the eve of dialogue between the Caretaker Government and political parties could not have come at a better time. In her meetings with government and political leaders, she stressed the importance of compromise, responsible behavior and rejecting winner-take-all politics. Coming two weeks after Assistant Secretary Richard Boucher came to Bangladesh with much the same message, Barks-Ruggles' visit ensured that Bangladeshis are crystal clear on the importance the USG attaches to a timely return to democracy via free, fair and credible elections. Barks-Ruggles' visit greatly enhanced Post efforts to support democracy, development and the denial of space to terrorists in Bangladesh.

110. (U) DAS Barks-Ruggles has cleared this cable.
Moriarty